

November 2004



# MONTANA GEAR UP

GAINING EARLY AWARENESS & READINESS FOR  
UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

*Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education / Montana University System*



## **Director's Message:** by Sandy Merdinger

Transitions....Montana GEAR UP is going through several personnel transitions this fall. Andi Rankin and Annette Walstad have been on board over a month and are already serving GEAR UP well. By the time you read this, Lance Foster will have moved to Idaho, and Aaron Mayernik will be in place as the high school outreach coordinator. Additionally, the Office of Public Instruction is screening applications for the new GEAR UP Specialist and then interviews will begin. Finally, Susan King, Program Assistant for GEAR UP for over three years, has left GEAR UP and has accepted a position in the Accounting Division at the Montana Department of Revenue. I know Susan has helped many of you over during her years in GEAR UP, and we all wish Susan the best in her new position. The Program Assistant position is changing to Administrative Associate III, and we will fill it as soon as possible.

Just as Montana GEAR UP is going through several transitions now, your GEAR UP seniors are facing a major life transition as they finish their last year in high school and graduate. Are they ready? Do they have the tools they need for this transition? How can we better prepare them in these few months before graduation? Please let us know what you see as needs for these seniors that we can help with this year.

Of course, as much as we might hope that all graduates go to college, not everyone will be doing so next fall. Nonetheless, graduation is a time of celebration. For many students, finishing high school in and of itself is a success that may not have happened without the work you have done with them since the inception of the GEAR UP program.

For those planning to go to college, there is still much to do to support them for what may be the biggest transition in their lives to date. With your help, GEAR UP will do what it can to make this transition a smooth one.

## **Good bye Lance & Susan, Welcome Aaron:**

Susan King left the GEAR UP program after more than three years of service to put her degree and skills to use at the Montana Department of Revenue. Susan has been Montana GEAR UP's longest serving employee, has seen many changes in the program, and will miss working with everyone in the field. We thank Susan for her dedicated service and wish her well in her new career!

Lance Foster's last day with the Montana Guaranteed Student Loan Program was October 28th. When asked what his future holds, Lance responded that he is "moving to paradise to rent pintos to tourists." After further prying though, Lance disclosed that in fact he is going to Boise, ID where he will be closer to his son and plans to pursue a career in law enforcement. Good luck Lance!

Aaron Mayernik was hired to fill Lance's position as the Financial Aid Outreach Specialist. Aaron is from Shelby and received his degree in communications from Carroll College in 2001. He is a former Americorps Vista Volunteer where he worked at the Montana Headstart State Collaboration Office. Aaron started work in the Montana Guaranteed Student Loan Program office on October 25 and looks forward to meeting staff in the field and working with our GEAR UP high school students around Montana. Be sure to introduce yourself and welcome Aaron when he comes to your school.

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## The GEAR UP Spotlight: Arrowhead, and Hardin

**Arrowhead:** Arrowhead School and Montana GEAR UP are proud of Caroline Pihl, a 2004 Park High graduate and former Arrowhead student. Caroline is currently a freshman at Harvard University where she is now a GEAR-UP mentor at Madison Park Vocational Technical High School in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Caroline mentors four students in a junior level English class, two of whom are ESL students. She is working with a team of three other students, and they promote college readiness and awareness to their students. She has yet to declare a major but has expressed interest in international relations. Way to go Caroline!



**Hardin:** *The Big Burn* was a big hit at the Hardin Middle School. The GEAR UP program purchased a copy of the book *The Big Burn* by Montana author Jeanette Ingold for every student in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades at Hardin Middle School and the 6<sup>th</sup> graders at the Crow Agency school. The reading project is a cross curriculum effort at the middle school with every teacher contributing at least one lesson plan based on some aspect of the book. Hardin Middle School students are all assigned a team teacher, and each team produced a bulletin board outside their classroom tailored by grade. The sixth graders were responsible for boards related to the characters in the book, 7<sup>th</sup> graders to the setting of the book, and the 8<sup>th</sup> graders dealt with the many conflicts facing the characters in the book. This format produced a wide range of visual presentations on a single book. The language arts teachers devoted the entire month of September to *The Big Burn* including writing projects requiring technology, visual presentations, and oral arguments using the philosophical chairs format. Movies produced by the U.S. Forest Service were shown, and a representative from the Forest Service talked about modern day fire fighting as well as giving an historical overview. The culminating activity was a day with the author on October 1<sup>st</sup>. Jeanette Ingold of Missoula talked to the entire student population about writing in general, the research required to write, and the personal joy writing can bring. Mrs. Ingold worked with students in classroom settings during the afternoon. She often noted while working with the students, “If you can talk, you can write.” To make the day even better, the OPI Yellow Bus tour was also at the Hardin Schools, and this was a great opportunity to showcase the great work of GEAR UP being done in schools today. It’s too bad the day wasn’t longer!

There are people behind the scenes that have volunteered their service to the GEAR UP program but have received little recognition. They are the members of the Advisory Committee. Two members of the committee have served our program with dedication since its inception and have witnessed the many changes the program has undergone. They are Renee Boisseau, the principal of Kila Middle School and Joel Voytoski, the superintendent of Evergreen Schools. Don Gilbertson, the principal at Hardin Middle School joined GEAR UP a year and a half after it started in Montana and has been a fixture on the committee ever since.

## The GEAR UP Advisory Committee:

To broaden the perspective and to gain input from more GEAR UP schools, the committee was enhanced this year with four new members. The new additions to the committee are Melanie Magee, liaison from Browning, Kathy Heisler, counselor from Lincoln, Kevin Barsotti, counselor from Box Elder, and James Hodgson, counselor from Hays/Lodgepole.

The first meeting with this expanded group was held the evening before the fall conference. The advisory committee will continue to meet quarterly throughout the year to provide insight and advice regarding the needs in our schools that GEAR UP should work to address. They will also be a very important resource as we put together our new grant proposal.

Committee members were asked what impact they would like to have on the GEAR UP program. Responses included: “continuing to improve on the lines of communication between state staff and the people in the field,” “letting other schools know that there is an advisory committee, and that people should feel free to utilize them as a conduit to have impact on the GEAR UP program;” and “helping in the effort to put together another GEAR UP grant proposal that will be awarded in Montana.” Renee Boisseau said it best though, when she stated that she wants to “make sure that what GEAR UP is doing is affecting the bottom line on the student level. What’s most important about our work is to make sure that we are doing the right thing on their behalf and not getting too caught up or stuck in the mechanics of how the program is run. If we are not making that positive impact for students then we are not really doing our jobs.”

## **The GEAR UP Achievement Grant:**

Application packets for the GEAR UP Achievement Grant were sent at the beginning of October to liaisons and administrators in GEAR UP schools. This launches the one month application period in which this year's 11<sup>th</sup> grade GEAR UP students have the opportunity to apply for the \$1,000 grant.

To be eligible for the grant, students must: be enrolled in a GEAR UP school for at least 2 years beginning no later than the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, be enrolled in a GEAR UP school at the time of application and tracked by a GEAR UP administrator, take college preparatory courses, have a minimum GPA of 2.0 upon high school graduation, and plan to enroll in a postsecondary institution within 18 months of high school graduation. Recipients of the grant must use it towards the cost of higher education and can use it at any accredited postsecondary institution throughout the United States.

The grant is an incentive to encourage and support students from low-income backgrounds to set high academic expectations, stay in school, study hard, and take courses needed to prepare them for college-level studies - not to mention that it is an excellent opportunity for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students to get a running start on paying for college. Only students that receive this grant are eligible to apply for the Montana GEAR UP Pathways Scholarship, which is valued at up to \$20,000, based on financial need.

This is the third year that 11<sup>th</sup> grade GEAR UP students have had the opportunity to apply for the achievement grant since its inception in 2002, when the first 77 grants were awarded. Of those award recipients, 43 are currently enrolled in college this fall and using their grant. Last year we received 224 applications from 11<sup>th</sup> graders and awarded 191 GEAR UP Achievement Grants. This year we look forward to an even larger applicant pool. Recipients of the grant will be announced in January!

To be considered, applications must be postmarked no later than November 5, 2004. If you have any questions about the GEAR UP Achievement Grant, please contact Mary Taylor, State Grants Coordinator at (406) 444-0638, or e-mail [mtaylor@mgspl.state.mt.us](mailto:mtaylor@mgspl.state.mt.us).

The Montana Guaranteed Student Loan Program (MGSLP) is pleased to announce the kick-off of its sixth annual Essay

## **The MGSLP Essay Contest:**

Contest! MGSLP sponsors this contest for middle and high school students in GEAR UP schools. This opportunity lets students put their writing skills to work to help them earn a scholarship towards the cost of their college education. Over the past five years MGSLP has given out 568 essay awards, totaling over **\$138,000**.

The guidelines and topics for this year's contest were mailed out to schools in October. Winners for the upcoming year will be selected by grade level, and the awards will be in the form of a college scholarship. The award amount for the 2004-2005 Essay Contest winners will be \$150 or \$250, depending on grade level. The deadline for submitting essays is March 1, 2005. Winners will be announced next spring during ceremonies held at each of the participating middle or high schools. MGSLP anticipates awarding over 175 college scholarships this year.

Last year over 1,400 essays were submitted, with 146 students receiving first place honors for their award winning work. MGSLP is in the process of publishing a booklet containing essays selected from the 2003-2004 Essay Contest. You should expect to see that booklet out in January.

If you have any questions about the Essay Contest, please contact Mary Taylor, State Grants Coordinator at (406) 444-0638, or e-mail [mtaylor@mgspl.state.mt.us](mailto:mtaylor@mgspl.state.mt.us).

## **November Reminders:**

- Kelly Hert, Federal Programs Accountant, will be conducting three training sessions for school clerks on November 15, 16, 17 in Billings, Great Falls, and St. Ignatius respectively. Please see the insert in this newsletter for detailed information.
- The next Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for December 1-2 in Helena.
- The next Liaison meeting is scheduled for January 31-February 1, 2005 at Chico Hot Springs.
- The school surveys are to be returned to the Montana Small Schools Alliance by November 5.
- Please submit your GEAR UP Spotlight articles by the 20th of the month to be included in following newsletters to Peter Butler at [pbutler@oche.montana.edu](mailto:pbutler@oche.montana.edu).
- This newsletter is also available online by visiting <http://gearup.montana.edu/>
- Please let us know if someone would like to be added to the newsletter distribution list.

## **The Student Assistance Foundation receives grant to implement College Goal Sunday throughout Montana:**

The Student Assistance Foundation was recently awarded a \$182,305 grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education to implement College Goal Sunday in Montana. The first annual College Goal Sunday is slated for the afternoon of February 13, 2005. College Goal Sunday is a volunteer, charitable effort to assist low-income students and those who have no college-going tradition with successful completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

College Goal Sunday is open to all higher education bound students and their families, but particularly targets low-income students who need financial aid to attend college. Financial aid officers and other qualified professionals volunteer their time to ensure students receive any necessary assistance in understanding and completing paperwork to receive financial aid.

"College Goal Sunday is important for Montana because families often cite high cost of higher education as the main barrier to college attendance," said Jim Stipcich, President/CEO of Student Assistance Foundation of Montana. "Participation in College Goal Sunday assists families with making informed decisions about investments in education," Stipcich continued. Several Montana postsecondary schools will be participating as College Goal Sunday sites:

MSU - Northern  
Salish Kootenai College  
The University of Montana  
MSU - Billings  
Chief Dull Knife College  
Montana Tech

Blackfeet Community College  
Flathead Valley Community College  
MSU - Great Falls College of Technology  
Little Big Horn College  
Fort Peck Community College

In the months leading up to College Goal Sunday, the Student Assistance Foundation of Montana will embark on an extensive public relations and outreach effort to invite low-income students to participate in the event.

The Student Assistance Foundation's mission is to provide students and families with the knowledge and tools to finance and pursue their postsecondary education. The Foundation does this by offering a range of programs that include grants, community outreach, counseling and training on education finance planning.

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Montana Guaranteed Student Loan  
Program website:  
<http://www.mgslp.state.mt.us/>

National GEAR UP website:  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/gearup/index.html>